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ABSTRACT

This program, included in "Effective Reading Programs...," serves 320 students in grades 2-6. The majority of the students are white and come from low- and middle-income homes in the sururbs of a small city. Staggered scheduling allows two ungraded reading chains of 12 groups each to meet 45 minutes daily. Grouping is determined not by grade level but by reading comprehension. The reading specialist and classroom teachers teach the reading chain groups in morning and afternoon reading classes. Pupils move up the chain on teacher recommendation. Initially, all pupils view the same 10 half-hour formula phonics video tapes, which teach them a system for decoding. The students also meet in "dialogue groups" in which the oral reader (called the model) uses the system to decode unfamiliar words. Reinforcement is accomplished in a companion spelling program and in followup activities. Reading matter is chosen for its literary worth and interest level. Instruction is designed to move quickly from questions that clarify the reading to discussions that involve Socratic dialoguing, which teaches critical thinking skills and open-ended questioning at the highest level. (WR)

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SUBMITTED BY: JERRY COKER, PRINCIPAL
PATTERSON ROAD SCHOOL
ORCUTT UNION SCHOOL DISTRICT
400 PATTERSON ROAD
ORCUTT, CALIFORNIA 93454

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PATTERSON ROAD SCHOOL'S FORMULA PHONICS READING CHAIN

BY

JERRY COKER, PRINCIPAL

In December, 1972, Patterson Road Elementary School in the Orcutt Union School District, Orcutt, Santa Barbara County, California, became the first school in America to be restructured to accommodate a Formula Phonics Videotape Reading Chain. This was a major undertaking because it involved the restructuring of our school day; the training of staff, myself included, to use a reading-language processing system which was totally different from the basal reading system used previously; the introduction of the new system to all of our second through sixth graders; and the introduction of the program to our parents and expanded community. We can say with certainty that the effort was worth it; for now our students are among the best reading -- and best read -- boys and girls in America. Our school is one of the most visited sites in California. And our Formula Phonics Reading Chain has been cited, after a search which studied some 1500 reading programs nation-wide, as constituting one of the most effective reading programs in the land. This paper is written so we may share information about our reading program with other educators.

COMMUNITY: Orcutt is a semi-rural suburb of Santa Maria, California, a city close to the space complex at Vandenberg Air Force Base. Our students are generally majority ethnic (3% minority) and come from upper-lower and lower-middle income homes. The transiency rate at Patterson Road School is very high. We are paired with another school which sends

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us its educationally handicapped and learning disability group boys and girls during the course of the school year as they are identified. As our program has matured, our parents have become ever more supportive of our efforts.

OUR PROGRAM - STAFF DEVELOPMENT: The specific system which is used in the decoding, questioning, and spelling elements of our program is called Formula Phonics. The reliability and ease of instruction of these elements have made it possible for us to devote the major portion of our instructional time treating with the higher level learning and thinking processes. We call everything a teacher teaches a pupil to do with the printed word "language processing." In every Dialog Group this processing of language goes forward in the affective and cognitive domains by way of reading, spelling, writing, listening and speaking. It also goes forward in the several content areas and in the practical and fine arts areas as well.

As the first step in the program, all of our certificated staff were trained in the specific Formula Phonics methodology by reading two teaching manuals, Formula Phonics, which treats with decoding and oral language processing, and the Formula Phonics Spelling Book, which treats with spelling and written language processing. We then continued our training by watching together and then discussing the video tapes which make up The Formula Phonics Videotape Reading Program. We studied those video programs very carefully because we knew that later we were to show ten of them to all of our second through sixth graders. (Today in addition to the twelve video programs which we used in our training there are five new programs which contain segments which were videotaped on-site at Patterson Road School and which are used as a part of our ongoing staff development.) In a series of after school sessions spread over two or three weeks, we finished this element of our training and were ready to set up our Reading Chain.

OUR PROGRAM - READING CHAIN DESIGN: The first step in setting up our Reading Chain consisted of using the ten video programs to fund every one of our second through sixth graders with the same body of phonetic decoding and spelling information. Each of these tapes is about 24 minutes long and we found that, as a general rule, students in grades three to six are able to handle one tape per day. This is because students process the information in the video programs even as they watch by working along in their programming book, The Formula Phonics Reading Book, and do the suggested follow-up activities afterwards.

Because second graders and special education youngsters usually required a longer period of time to watch the video programs, they started watching them some time before the others. Students only watch the ten video programs once in their school lives. After the first year only second graders and new enrollees need watch them each September. Of course, each new student who enrolls in our school anytime after September watches the ten programs before being assigned to a Dialog Group.

While our students were watching the video programs in their homerooms, we were busy setting up our Reading Chains. We instituted a staggered day schedule with half our pupils arriving 45 minutes early in the morning and the others remaining 45 minutes later in the afternoon so that our teachers enjoy the luxury of teaching two small Reading Chain groups each day. Each student was assigned to a homogeneous, ungraded group according to consideration of vocabulary and comprehension scores on the C.T.B.S. and our teachers' personal assessments of total reading capacity, store of information based on previous reading, and maturity level.

Each of the reading sections is called a Dialog Group and our Reading Chain is made up of a number of groups. In our Chain every child, including second graders, can be assigned to the top group if that is where the

faculty believes he would profit the most. However, in placing students in the Reading Chain, great care is taken to see to it that older boys and girls are not placed in groups dominated by those who are younger. Additionally, every five or six weeks every student is evaluated by the staff and those who are ready are placed in higher groups in the Chain.

Just before our Reading Chain was to go into operation, our teachers drew numbers to determine which group they were to teach in our morning Chain and which group in our afternoon Chain. Thus, in the morning a sixth grade teacher might find herself working with second and third graders, while a second grade teacher might draw a group of gifted fourth, fifth, and sixth graders. Each might find herself with an entirely different group of youngsters in the afternoon. Obviously, we knew that we must learn to treat with every type of reading and language instructional need and procedure which one might find in any school.

This is particularly true when one learns that every five or six weeks the teacher-dialogists rotate groups. On those occasions, every teacher moves down to the next lower group and the teacher with the lowest reading ability group moves up to teach the group at the top of the Chain. Having teachers rotate groups provides that every student will, over a period of one or two years, be exposed to the special teaching skills and literary expertise of every teacher.

Our reading specialist maintains individual and group records for all students in the Reading Chain. Titles of books and other reading sources used in Dialog Groups are recorded along with group reading scores on a cumulative basis. In addition to serving as a resource specialist to staff regarding discussion techniques and language arts activities, she relieves classroom teachers for observing other teachers during reading time. We call this "walking through the Chain" and find it to be a most valuable tool for professional growth.

The final organizational technique involves staff discussion sessions. These are especially important during the first two years of the program and even after that time we find they serve a useful purpose. These feedback sessions must be honest, open, and provide positive input for constant program improvement.

OUR READING CHAIN - TEACHING STRATEGIES: Virtually every minute in each 45 minute dialog period is given over to the reading, discussion (dialog), and other processing of worthy literature. Until a child progresses to one of our many top groups where the students are reading and processing such works as Flowers for Algernon, The Hobbit, Fantastic Voyage, or Animal Farm, his group will always be reading material which is about two years above his tested reading level and never below his true grade level. This is possible because all of the students in a group have been exposed to the same body of phonetic information and because the teacher works with the group as though it were an individual.

In the Dialog Groups one student and then another is called on to read aloud. Everyone understands that the oral reader is serving as a model to the whole group. The model reads as much or as little as his teacher desires; and at any point during, or immediately after, the teacher questions the entire group concerning any word, sentence, paragraph, or idea the reading material contains. If a model encounters a word he does not know, the teacher writes it on a hand held chalkboard and then leads the group in attacking the word. Final closure on the word, however, is reserved for the model.

To aid in systematizing these very important word attack episodes, each classroom contains a set of four Formula Phonics poster-wall charts. Two of these charts carry basic phonetic information; a third contains the formula; and the fourth which is called the "Dialog Chart" gives the group a structure for discussion and for writing after decoding episodes.

The Formula functions as a systematic retrieval system which students use to retrieve and then apply the phonetic information they received from the ten video programs and have had consistently reinforced in the Dialog Groups and in their homerooms.

At Patterson Road our students attack words only in the natural context of reading for information and pleasure . They develop decoding skills as an outcome of the group process. We observed that during each month in our program students internalized more and more of the decoding system. Because of this our teachers spent less and less time helping groups attack words and more and more time in building vocabulary or in discussing plot, characterization, inference, or ideas.

Another way in which we help our boys and girls learn decoding skills is by way of spelling. The system's spelling program does away with the need for most drill on phonetic skills and at the same time opens up the world of writing for our students. The spelling formula and the decoding formula help our students utilize the same body of phonetic information and skills. Just as soon as our youngsters begin to synthesize the spelling system we begin teaching them to process what they read by way of writing. This is another reason why we always have our students read the best written literature possible. We want what they read to serve as a model for what they write.

Because we elected not to use controlled vocabulary material, high interest-low vocabulary stories, or simplified abridgements when teaching our youngsters to read, finding reading material did present a problem. During the first year almost all reading in the Dialog Groups was in short stories. We borrowed anthologies from the secondary schools for our more able groups and used upper-elementary material for our younger and less able readers.

After the first year, most of our teachers turned to paperback editions of quality selections for use with the Dialog Groups. Our reading specialist maintains a library of these titles which we buy in sets of 23 copies per title. This number was chosen because while our groups average 15 students each, occasionally the top groups swell to 20 students. Our yearly cost for these titles for all groups in the Chain has averaged about $250.00 and we now have a collection of more than 100 titles.

Because Formula Phonics takes care of the mechanics of decoding and spelling and so permits our students to work in serious literature, most of our staff development work during the second and third years has been in the areas of higher language processing and questioning. We believe that while it is important to teach students how to attack words, to spell, and to develop their vocabularies, it is far more important to teach them how to process whatever it is they read.

In our staff development-feedback sessions we have read and discussed such authors as Bloom and Taba. We have used materials developed at the Nebraska Curriculum Development Center at the University of Nebraska and at California's Structure of the Intellect Center. Additionally, staff at Integrative Learning Systems of Glendale California, who designed our Reading Chain and produces all Formula Phonics materials, has been most helpful in teaching us to handle the three areas of inquiry -- basic, maieutic, and Socratic -- which we employ in our Dialog Groups and classrooms.

I say "classrooms" because our Formula Phonics Reading Chain Program has had its greatest impact on the day-to-day teaching in the homerooms. We have moved to a point at Patterson Road School where virtually all students read and process content area curriculum in materials written at or above their true grade level. In fact, during the past (1974-1975) school year much of the content area reading in our third through sixth grade classrooms has been in Scholastic Units which we ordered from the California State Supplementary Secondary Book Lists.

CONCLUSION: Our Formula Phonics Reading Chain at Patterson Road Elementary School has "turned our school around" because it is a program for every one of our students and every one of our teachers. While the hard data is overwhelming -- our third graders in spring, 1974, scoring at the 94%ile -- the effect of the program on the total educational process is really more important. Our classrooms are quiet and orderly and happy. Our teachers are teaching and our girls and boys are learning. Our message? "When all of the resources of all of the members of highly trained and motivated faculty are focused on a group of boys and girls, there appears to be no limit as to how far those youngsters may be taught."

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